

# Interview with Marlon Riggs Listening to the heartbeat

by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

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*This interview was conducted by Chuck Kleinhans in Oakland CA in November 1989, with Marlon Riggs shortly after the premiere of Riggs' TONGUES UNTIED at the American Film Institute Video Festival. The interview was prepared in written form by Julia Lesage.*

Chuck Kleinhans: TONGUES UNTIED has a strong personal sense, which the extensive use of poetry contributes to. Would you talk about your use of poetry and how that relates to your use of the first person and inclusion of yourself as a voice and screen presence in the tape?

Marlon Riggs: In a way all the poetry that was coming out by black gay men inspired TONGUES UNTIED. About two years before I made this, a number of voices had started to speak out in a very eloquent fashion and in a very different way from what you would expect. Around 1985-86 the primary means of expression for black gay men and a black gay identity was through poetry — using all forms and all kinds of expression. I saw one anthology after another of black gay voices in poetry, short stories, and experimental essay forms. All this seemed interesting material for a documentary.

I conceived of a video about poets, in particular about a black gay men's poetry workshop in New York, The Other Countries Workshop. The Other Countries collective gets together and reads *for* each other and then they undergo a sort of self criticism — of the group, of their work. Many members are first time writers, trying to get published; others are very experienced and have written a lot. I didn't know of anything like that, especially here on the west coast, and, in fact, not in many other places in the east. I was fascinated by this kind of collective support for a poetic form of expression.

TONGUES UNTIED began with wanting to do the poets. But that could only go so far before it got reduced to, "Yeah, poets, black gay poets, that's interesting and different, but a little boring." How do you make this subject matter visually compelling? What the people were saying was extremely compelling. How could I

make the tape as visually, formally, and structurally compelling? I moved more and more towards a non-linear, non-traditional documentary. After a while, I even abandoned the word "documentary," seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words.

So I was really just looking at poems, especially those that dealt with being black and gay. Lots of black gay poetry deals with being black or alone or alienated. But it keeps being gay as a subtext — if you know the poet and you know the anthology, then you read it into it. I knew I needed to find poems which explicitly dealt with sexuality as well as race. I didn't want one or the other but the convergence of the two. To select things, I read through volumes and volumes and informally had people submit things to me — meeting this person and that, talking to people, in particular, talking to Essex Hemphill. Hemphill has probably published as much if not more than any other black gay poet in this country. His work moves me extremely just reading it, and it did so before I ever met or heard him.

I had had little affinity for poetry before this. The only poet I remember enjoying was Walt Whitman, to whom I was introduced in college. I never grew up with poetry around the house or read it or used it as a form of expression. But looking at these poems I really saw what was missing. So much of what our culture considers classic poetic form doesn't address my life, directly or even indirectly. Classical poetry is about a different culture, an oppressive and alienating culture, at least in relation to my own. For once, to have poetry speak directly to my own experience was very moving.

So I was talking with Essex, reading his poetry, reading poetry from the Other Countries anthology, meeting with those poets — some of whose work had not been published — and reading and listening. In some ways, I was very promiscuous, listening to and recording anything. At one point I didn't judge whether or not something was formally and structurally a "good" poem. Rather I asked, "What's its passion?" How clearly does it state longing and internalized conflict and a sense of wanting to struggle against that? Also, could I communicate that poem in a visual medium? Some poems are wonderful but so dense with metaphor and so quick in their juxtapositions that you can't make them work with images. I had to find poems which were almost conversational in structure and style, which I knew would work in video.

In turn, the poetry inspired my own writing. I had never written in a very poetic form, and now I was writing in freestyle — not haiku or couplets but in a very condensed form, looking at images as metaphor, selecting a few iconic words and phrases that would bring up reverberations and resonances in what viewers would see and think and feel. I wanted to use everything in the way the poems did, with words and phrases coded for the black community or the black gay community.

Other people would understand, for instance, the word "snap." There's nothing obscure about it. Yet, as with any culture, if it's something you do and it's part of your ritual, when you see it as an image, it has a very different meaning for you. I felt liberated to use a lot of material like that and in a very different context. I no longer felt constrained to ask, "Will other people get it? Will it make sense? Is my

communication too closed?" Poetry liberated me to be condensed in style, to select things and talk almost in metaphor. The tape's structure was scripted, but I wanted to make every moment, syllable, and word count,

I didn't come to this tape's personal involvement easily. It's not in my training or my nature or my personality. I've always hated being in front of a camera and have never even used my own voice before in a work. What really moved me to do it was the need to get at the issue of black gay men loving white gay men. Most of the writings I came across present the viewpoint of black men who love black men. They're critical of black men who love white men. But this always seems like an outsider's perspective, a critical judgment coming from somebody looking down on somebody else — who's seen in a way as betraying the race. This viewpoint might be satisfactory for black men who love black men, but for black men who are into white men, it'd provoke more defensiveness and denial than anything else.

I was looking for a strategy to keep people's defenses from going up, to allow them to hear and see and hopefully to reflect upon themselves, especially if they're in that situation. So I found myself pushed to reveal my own story. In some ways it makes it disarming for a black viewer to understand this paradox, to see someone who really believes in black culture, black life, and black history drawn in a very subconscious and, if you will, involuntary, way toward what some might consider your enemy, the opposition, or at least your alien — the other. How do you embody that in a way that makes it real and human and understandable and sympathetic, even to viewers who don't feel that? So they'd understand sympathetically or even empathetically what someone like that is going through?

To make this jump meant really a big leap of faith in myself — that I could do this and it'd work and it wouldn't be self-indulgent. In personal video and in personal expression in documentary, you always have to consider how far to go in your revelation. How much do you treat the camera as a diary, if you will? How much can you say before it becomes self-indulgent, boring and excessive? I worried, "Am I saying too much? What am I holding back?" It was still too sensitive for me because I didn't want to be judged on those terms. I constantly faced that struggle. After a while I stopped thinking about being judged. I said, "Well, since you put this much out here in terms of your life, you can't worry now about the little extra eighth of an inch you're about to give. By now people are with you or they've rejected you. You might as well go with it completely."

In this experimental form, I wanted an anchor. Not a dominant one-and-only point of view. There're a multiplicity of voices in the video, not just my voice. In fact, in terms of total time, the percentage of time with my voice is fairly small. But because I have such a dominant place at a pivotal point in the video, my viewpoint becomes, in a way, a thread throughout. And I hope that this sensibility gives the audience a sense of coherence and cohesion in terms of everything else said.

I have a problem with some experimental forms, which go from one visualized piece of poetry to another. Yes, they may all deal with black gay identity — different voices, different people — but almost like moving from one vignette to another with no clear relation. I understood this as a problem when first thinking about the

video. How do I make connections among different actors, different voices, and different forms? It's not an easy unity. I was looking for that thread — which became me. It was a structural kind of function that it became me who would provide that sort of coherence. I didn't do it by stepping in as narrator: "Now you we seeing what it looks like to vogue, children. Now you are seeing what the snap is." I wanted to provide a subtle undercurrent beneath the audio and image surface. The undercurrent is that there's a person whose journey you're going through, who you're accompanying as other people talk about their lives. And it's not as if they are telling you everything. As other people are telling you things, you get both his and your encounter with these other people.

CK: The piece has a development that makes it seem like we're present in it. In its organization, it moves from one issue to another and enriches everything at each step. Things introduced early on are reflected upon in a very different context at a later point, and we've learned other things along the way. It was really remarkable at the end of it that I had the sense that I really knew a lot more about black gay men, yet they were not presented as a unity. It did not convey a sense of something like, "Oh, there's this category of black gay men, they all think alike and they all are alike." The tape made me understand that there's diversity around a set of issues and experiences, that those experiences are very different for different people. It is an incredibly difficult thing to express the complexity of any social group and to get viewers to realize, "There're things that pull us together but there's also diversity among us. You shouldn't just rest on the idea that once you have a label that you've explained something."

That was not only fascinating to me, but it gave me lots of ideas because I also make video. It was, "Oh, this is something I can steal from!"

MR: Don't feel bad. I do it all the time myself! Again, I was stealing left and right. I didn't care. I was promiscuous in terms of forms. Some filmmakers learn a certain discipline. For them, that's it. They try to apply it over and over, refining it some way. Somebody who came in once during my editing the rough-cut said, "That looks like MTV!" I answered, "I don't care if it looks like MTV. If it works, that's fine for me."

CK: Well, this is quite a change from ETHNIC NOTIONS in terms of voice, and whom you are explaining something to and what you we taking for granted. Yet you're also doing a continuation of ETHNIC NOTIONS.

MR: That's true. With ETHNIC NOTIONS, I was trying to communicate to a broad audience, the kind people write about in their grant proposals as "general audience." I wanted to communicate to a primary audience which was a large, multicultural, black, white, latino, asian, male, female, gay, straight, bisexual, whatever audience. It is important for everyone so understand how racial caricatures and stereotyping function as tools of socialization and social control.

First I had to assume that most viewers don't know much about U.S. history, so I had to re-inform viewers about the basic historical context for these images. And then I had to connect these images to real social consequences, so that viewers

could see a relation between the image, for instance, of the black mammy and the opportunities previously afforded black women to work just as cooks, maids and housekeepers. I wanted to demonstrate the relations between image and social control.

Also, because these images work on such a deep subconscious level in our culture and have done so for so long, I was afraid to play with them. A playful, nontraditional, nonlinear, nonhistorical form could be easily misinterpreted. To have images coming this way and that, 1850s images thrown in with 1950s ones, and a sort of funny voice over poking fun at the images — such a style could have been easily and justifiably interpreted as: "Well, you're saying that none of this is really serious. Either it's all behind us so we don't need to take it seriously anymore, or it's so well integrated in our lives and we understand it so well that we can laugh about it." I didn't feel that either of those interpretations was the case. The tape required a certain gravity, a certain scholarship, if you will, a certain sense of authority in speaking about those images.

And it required a sort of unity or consensus of voice about what those images mean. Given the audience I wanted to reach, I faced a set of real constraints in terms of what people knew and how they would interpret the material. I already knew some common reactions when people saw the images. They were either totally blown away and shocked and disgusted, or they'd look at a little figurine of a black child eating a watermelon and say, "Isn't that cute?" I realized I had to walk a fairly narrow and straight line; otherwise, things could really go awry. A more experimental, quirky or eccentric form would have deeply and rightly offended an audience that wants to understand the weight of these images in our culture and how much such images have held us down in terms of racism and discrimination and oppression. It was not an unconventional piece at all. Only the content made it different.

In *TONGUES UNTIED*, I was not dealing with history, or at least a tradition of historical scholarship rooted in physical evidence. The history in *TONGUES UNTIED* is phrased more in terms of the context of understanding a culture. And I use it in a kind of advocacy role, placing black gay men within the overall historical context of black struggle in this country. I was also dealing with personal expression, my own and that of the other poets. That was liberating, too. The rules about getting the facts right or the correct interpretation of history no longer applied. Actually I now believe this other form of expression is true for conveying history, too (though at the time I didn't).

In *TONGUES UNTIED* I was dealing with the weaving, in terms of our lives, where truth, fiction, fantasy, fact, history, mythology really interweave to inform our character, psyche, values and beliefs. Changing my mind about traditional history has been part of my evolution. Before I considered history and mythology, fact and fiction as separate and obviously discreet. Now I don't think so in terms of how they inform us and work within us to make us who and what we are as individuals and as a culture, as a group, race, and nationality.

Without these constraints I not only could express a very different content but had

room to play with form. I could experiment in a way that even might confuse some viewers. Since my intended primary audience was really focused on black gay men, I didn't mind if everybody got it. It was important that everybody got the point of ETHNIC NOTIONS. Frankly, with TONGUES UNTIED if white heterosexuals don't understand the reasons why black people are angry and just consider this piece militant, then so be it. I'm not going to take time to justify this for people for whom this experience is totally alien. TONGUES UNTIED is an affirmation of the feelings and experiences of black gay men, made for them by a black gay man, or actually by black gay men because the piece has a number of voices. If others understand, fine, but making sure everyone understands was not my prerequisite in making this.

Audience is very important to me, but in terms of thinking critically about who your audience is and how you intend to reach them. Who are your other potential audiences and how they might read your work? Are they as important as your primary audience? It's very important to think about those issues before actually constructing your work because it affects what you do and the decisions you make.

CK: What has been the response so far? I know it's only been fifteen days since its premiere.

MR: Phenomenal. I really never expected it quite like this. Before its first showing at the American Film Institute Video Festival, I was in the editing room day and night. I didn't have work-in-progress screenings to gauge people's responses. I was fairly isolated, just trying to finish this — because when school got started again, I wouldn't have an editing room and students would be coming in asking questions. If I didn't finish it now, I wouldn't until sometime next year. Editing was really a focused and intense time, just trying to make things work. I had an image in my mind, which worked when I saw the reels in my head. I was trying to make the editing tape conform to that. Then the first showing was at the AFI Video Festival to an audience that really was not my intended primary audience. To have people react so wonderfully was a shock.

I thought, if people liked it because of its strange form, I'd be appreciative, but I'd gauge the real response a few weeks from then when I could show it to gay black men. But I found it extremely heartwarming to have the content, that is, the black gay experience and my expression of it, transcend being a message to black gays and speak to others who have also felt alienated, outcast, silenced, and for me to see how they could understand the piece's reverberations on that level.

I've had a second screening here at the Film Arts Festival with a packed, sold-out crowd at the Roxy Theater in San Francisco. It was just amazing. I was on edge, facing a hometown crowd including some of TONGUES UNTIED's participants who'd never seen the video before. I was anxious and wondering, "What are they going to think? Did I get the credits and names spelled right?" I worried about all the little minutia, not really able to enjoy the flow. "Are they getting this? Are they going to laugh now?" I couldn't tell. I was so keyed up that it wasn't until afterwards when people stood up and gave a standing ovation (I hear it was the only one at the festival) that I realized that people were really responding.

Especially when I got outside and everyone was coming up, a friend said, "I'm not a black man. I'm not a gay man. I'm a straight, white, Jewish woman. But I understood what you see and what you meant and what you were saying, and I loved it!"

The response came because the piece said something that hadn't been said before, but also TONGUES UNTIED said it with such passion. There's no yelling and screaming throughout the piece; it doesn't rant or rave or rage against white people. It's not that kind of piece. But there's passion suffused throughout. The feeling and emotion, as well as the personal revelation seem to have touched people. TONGUES UNTIED is still in its infant years, actually infant weeks. We'll see if it can stand on its two legs soon and face the world.

CK: I want to use it in a class that I'll be teaching on at mass culture and subcultures. We're looking at how subcultures use and borrow from mass culture, taking things over from mass culture for themselves. I saw that kind of appropriation happening again and again on the tape and I was really fascinated with the section on vogueing. Historically, black intellectuals were concerned about this process. DuBois wrote about the significance of spirituals, looking beyond how the songs promote resignation and getting a reward in heaven to stress their resistance represent oppression. Richard Wright explained black culture by seeing this element of resistance in the blues where often outsiders have really misunderstood it.

MR: Or understanding it, have tried to distort it.

CK: Again and again the tape shows this kind of appropriation, which intrigues me. I want to demonstrate to my students how a subculture forms a cultural identity and how it can make powerful assertions about itself in a way that outsiders do not see. Or if they do observe it, they don't understand it very well, especially what function it has.

MR: This tape is partly about community-building. It's an affirmation of some of the things that we as black gay men take for granted. For example, lots of people snap. They snap on every syllable, and they don't think about it. You can go from Mississippi to California to New York and this cultural form will be recognized — there will be a response. Some people are ashamed about snap because they look at it and think, "Oh, we know he's a gay man." Yet, snap is also a form of resistance, a form of saying, "Yes, I'm different and I'm also proud of it." And there's that kind of resistance and affirmation throughout the tape — the vogueing, the dancing, the deliberately so-called-effeminate gestures in vogueing. You need a way to separate and deliberately distinguish yourself. You need somehow to affirm those gestures which the dominant culture looks down upon and considers inferior or reflecting a flawed personality or a flawed culture. We take that and reverse it in a way, so that it becomes a virtue rather than a vice or flaw.

Again, popular, black American dancing is so much a part of our culture, yet unfortunately some people are ashamed to dance within a public setting. "White folks will see us and will think, well, we're always happy, dancing darkies." But you



have to look at it on your own terms, from your own standard and not continually from eyes of blue. Look through your own eyes and realize that that is a form of cultural resistance, community building and cultural affirmation. If you do that, then you dance as liberation. In the dance sequence that follows the voguing sequence, after you've seen men voguing singly, you see an entire group of men dancing in the park. It's very brief, but it's a very strong moment. What might seem like, oh yeah, black folks dancing, you've looked right at it and now you're seeing it not just as dancing but as resistance and as liberation. In the tape, it's become a way of finding your way back to community, when you might have been lost within competing notions of alienation either because you dance for whites, or you do or don't dance, or whatever. Now in a way it means finding your way back to your roots, finding a way to an identity which is not just individually affirmed but culturally and socially affirmed.

CK: Another thing that I liked is the doo-wop singing in four-part harmony.

MR: I deliberately wanted to take the cultural forms that are part of the black community, that are very well-respected and well-loved, that in some ways are deemed classic cultural forms. It might be dancing or singing, here it's four-part doo-wop harmony. (I actually had wanted to do rap, a black gay rap, as well, but I couldn't get that together. Maybe it'll come in the future.) My goal was to take those things which in some ways have become very much enshrined in traditional popular culture, black American popular culture, and infuse them with something just a little bit different. In this case, a black gay aspect. Viewers can be simultaneously hooked and repulsed: "Boy, can that child sing! He's talking about black men loving black men." I'm playing with such conflicted reactions throughout TONGUES UNTIED. The marching, the civil rights protests interwoven with black gay men marching in gay rights marches, the black-gay-doo-wop love song. All of these things sort of snap, like the rhythm and rhyming of rap. We're talking about something that's in black gay expression. All the time I'm playing with traditional forms, yet altering them, perhaps innovating them because of this infusion of a black gay expression.

CK: Another thing I responded to very strongly because I see people actually having these experiences was the story on the bus where a man just totally dramatically takes over a public space and insists on his gay presence at the risk of bodily harm, if someone wants to go after him. These are kinds of incidents that the straight world does know about, Yet there's this way in which, rhetorically, when straights talk, they'll act as if they don't know anything about gay culture, or that they've never met gay people, or there're only "them" out there in the media or only those people in the Castro, or something like that. As if in their own community they've never had this experience. I know you haven't had any chance to hear many reactions but it seems risky even admitting that children...

MR: That children have sex?

CK: It's one of those things that people often don't want to hear or think about, even if they know it. Since it comes after the bus story, it seemed in a similar vein — things that people know about but often repress. Anyone who has ever raised a



child or been a child knows that children have sexuality, yet culturally it gets obliterated. And people know that there are black gays but that gets obliterated, too.

MR: It's strange, it never seemed like a risk. Perhaps it's a personal revelation, but it didn't seem such a big thing. At least in Fort Worth, Texas, as I was growing up, many friends talked about having sex at age six or seven or eight. You're not having, wow, adventurous sex, but you're experimenting. It is not that unusual in the black community, nor is it to admit what you liked. It was okay if you had sex with boys as long as you were the one on top, because then you were still a man or a boy. Only when the position was reversed were you like "cheap pussy," if you will. The term — to conquer the pussy — I obviously did not use in the tape. But these things were truths.

I decided that what I was going to deal with were in some ways explosive yet deeply repressed things in our community. Whether it was taking on the church, or taking on Eddie Murphy, or taking on child sexuality and child sex (children having sex, not just having sexual feelings but actually engaging in copulation). That would have to be done. It was either say nothing or go all out. I'd just have to take those risks and see how people react. I speak from within the black community, to which the tape is primarily directed. In the black community as well as in our society overall, there are things that we just don't deal with. We like to keep up a pretense that certain things aren't happening, certain knowledge is not known, certain behavior never occurs. Yet all of these things do go on. In this one area, I wanted to lift the lid and speak: "Yes, this happens. You can deal with it in a different way, but you will no longer deal with it by silence or deal with it by avoidance and oppression."

This acknowledgement is confrontational for some, I imagine, depending on where they're coming from. I haven't had that reaction yet, but the tape's been shown to sympathetic audiences. I will learn very shortly when we show it in a sociology class, which has a large latino and black population, not people who are particularly gay or progressive. We'll see how students react to them. I know it will be very different and threatening.

CK: Would you say a little about the section with the transvestite walking by the lake and your choice of music.

MR: The Nina Simone and Billie Holiday sections follow my voyage of trying to find self-in-community within the Castro (San Francisco's so-called gay mecca) and not finding it. In fact, I found just the opposite, what I'd already known, racism, hatred and bigotry. It was much more nuanced, much more subtle than what I'd found in the south growing up, but very present and obvious to me. As a transition in the tape, I drop my story and do not follow a conventional narrative, which would be to indicate when I say I left the Castro in search of someplace better, to show me someplace else. This confuses some viewers and I realize was a risk. The narrative line now moves into other stories, other identities which are much like my own. Not exactly, I've never been a drag queen, attracted to drag queens or dressed in drag as experimentation. Rather, I bridged this experience with my own,

so that after you hear me saying, "I left the Castro obviously longing for something better," you hear a Billie Holliday song: "I don't know why, but I'm feeling so sad. I long to try something I never had. Lover man, where can you be?" If you follow this metaphor, the lover man is not just a lover to sleep with but also lover-man community, friends, fellows, fellowship — where can you be? The image is one many people would find repulsive, a street drag queen, obviously rough-looking, not someone elegantly dressed with fine coiffured hair and makeup. You have to look at the humanity within that person and see that the experience which moved by my telling my story now applies to this person. And it's just through her gestures, her look, her sitting there that I was hoping that this empathy would be communicated.

Part of this sequence is personal. I love Billie Holliday and Nina Simone. I grew up with these songs. To use them means bringing up stuff from my past, I played those songs over and over as a kid and listened to them as my parents played them. That's partly why my own Nina Simone album is so scratched but I don't care if it's not perfect sounding. At age ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, I felt so lonely. Listening to this music kept me thinking that there must be something better than this. In the tape I used those songs as personal reflections from my life, which would hopefully bridge this identity to these very different people. Transvestites are different from myself and very different from most people we're seeing. Lots of men, even gay men, are repulsed by drag queens, consider them inferior and look upon them as caricatures, not seeing anything beyond the surface. That means looking upon transvestites in the way the straight community looks upon black gays or all gay men. I used this music to try to overcome that distance, to make these people real and their grief, longing, and needs as respectable and noble and as sympathetically felt by an audience as what was understood from my own story.

The Nina Simone song was one I had always loved. I played over and over as a kid and teenager the way some people played Beatles' songs or the Fifth Dimension or the Temptations. I'd pick up the record and play it again and again: "Black is the color..." I'd listen to Simone's voice tremble, it'd get so soft and it was so filled with .... I didn't know then why that song had such strong feeling and meaning for me. Now I look back and see obviously why. Her voice is androgynous and could almost play as a man's voice: "Black is the color of my true love's hair .. his hands ...his face" — it's obviously male gender here. That was before I knew I was gay and my response was not about a man talking about a woman. I had this sort of involuntary response to that song which really built up over the years.

I guess I'm very much like many gay men in that some women vocalists are the people whom I most admire and who speak what I feel. When I was looking for another copy, it was tough to find that particular album. My parents have the original and theirs was too scratched up to use.

I came across Essex's poem, "A Homicide," about a very different experience, about a black drag queen being murdered. But I didn't interpret it in that way. When I looked at the line, "His grief is not apparel. It is a wig it does not rest gently on my head," or when he's talking about, "I look, I search the waterfronts for the man I

love," those words have a very different meaning for me. They are about community, longing, need, love, the need for love and affirmation, and are not just about grief. In this sequence in the tape, the song, those words, and that image which I wanted to humanize for people worked.

CK: One interesting thing on the sound track is a heartbeat pattern. It provided an emotional tone through some of the things that were being said.

MR: It was a synthesized heartbeat, but a heartbeat. I knew that I'd eventually come to the line where I say on camera, "In search of self, I listen to the beat of my heart." The payoff was to keep on getting much further down. That's how I used the heartbeat — as I was doing with lots of the images and with audio in general. I wanted constantly to re-contextualize things so they'd mean something different each time you hear them. The first time you hear the heartbeat is over the title sequence, where you see me in slow-mo. It played like a rhythm, an introduction; it was dramatic. There it was just an audio device, nothing more than a heartbeat. You don't know what it means, it's just emerging from something. The next time you hear it is where you see the Castro images, and then you're hearing it in relation to me in particular, so perhaps it's my heartbeat. Then you start hearing it in relation to others' heartbeats, in the wages-of-silence sequence where you hear all these homophobic statements. There it's heartbeat as anger, a pounding, everything held within, muffled, tense. It beats, "Boom-boom," while you're hearing all this screaming and shouting, "Faggot, nigger, queer." During all this invective, you're getting this constant beat. It's a device but it's also a way of evoking that tension you feel when everything is constrained. When you don't speak out, the tension is just sort of there, just about to break the surface, held and not quite let go, always just barely there. Later the heartbeat becomes salvation, particularly when you get the chant and anger vented. When the heartbeat comes through that, it becomes almost a resolution. So you are looking your heartbeat as a source of life and then eventually a source of death, since entwined with its ticking is the virus, a source of death. I wanted to play with that paradox.

The ending was difficult because I wanted the tape to have a positive, glowing release. You've gotten through all this, glowing and concluding, "Yes, we can be black and gay and proud." Yet I wanted to return people to the risks. The risks obviously are personal for me in a very direct sense, but the images and sounds also hit risks in a metaphoric sense. This is a struggle; there is paradox within this struggle; the heartbeat is life but the heartbeat can also be death. So I was playing with the heartbeat as a device. I don't know if viewers intellectually think of it like that. It's okay if they don't; they feel the increasingly important meaning of the beat throughout. As device, it is not redundant, just added there to keep things moving along, but rather it functions integrally, like the music and the poetry.

CK: It coalesces at one point where the line is, "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The beat which you've been hearing all along is an echo of that line, and then it's very inspiring. Right after that we get into the putting together of the black men in the gay rights demonstration with civil rights demonstrations.

MR: ...and all of my heroes from the history, the mini-history. Travel through the

centuries of black American history in twenty seconds!

CK: At the end, TONGUES UNTIED brings together a lot of things, moving them out towards public demonstration. Up to that point we'd been in public space, but now there's a much more dramatic and open public drama and call to action.

MR: Unsympathetic viewers probably tune out long before, but if they stay to that point, it could make a lot of nationalists upset. To take our heroes and mix them in with a black gay rights march is totally repugnant and contradictory. How can you consider Frederick Jackson, and Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth in the same breath as gay men all marching down the street bare-chested? Obviously it makes perfect sense to me; from my vantage point that montage was absolutely necessary. I had to move my experience out of just the personal realm and make it a communal and public experience. But we also need to bring personal struggle into the political, social and cultural struggle. It's not sufficient to wage war just with the demons within but also with the demons outside. Part of the battle has been going on a long time. You understand that this is not something new, but that you're part of the struggle's continuum. You can draw resources and strength from previous battles won as well as lost, so you understand better what needs to be done to continue in the future. That was really important for me to say — not to remain personal and poetic but also to be hard edged and muscular in clarifying the connection between civil-rights black-American struggles for over three centuries and what we're doing now as black gay men.

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